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CHRISTMAS AND THE WAR

A SERMON

BY

T. B. STRONG

DEAN OF CHRIST CHURCH, OXFORD

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The following sermon was preached before the University in the Cathedral, Christ Church, on Christmas Day 1914 by the writer, as Dean of the Cathedral, in accordance with custom.

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CHRISTMAS AND THE WAR

'*And the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst thou not sow good seed in thy field? whence then hath it tares? And he said unto them, An enemy hath done this.*'—St. Matthew xiii, 27 and 28 (part).

Any one who reads the Bible carefully will not fail, I think, to notice two very remarkable points in the view of human life which is found there. On the one hand, we find a very clear and uncompromising view of sin. The characters whose lives we read of there are represented as human in this respect, that they are beset with temptations, and not infrequently fall. And when this happens there is no doubt as to the view which the writers take of them. When David commits his great sin, for instance, he is frankly condemned; there is no attempt to represent him as appealing from conventional standards to a higher law; he has just committed murder and adultery, and he must repent and face his punishment, and that is all. So, there are no excuses made for St. Peter's denials of our Lord; he was warned of his danger, but he was headstrong and self-confident, and fell accordingly. The great figures of Bible history are human in this, that they are liable to fall, and when they do their excellence in other respects does not mitigate judgement: their sin is wicked—just like the sin of any-

body else. And, on the other hand, the Bible is always looking forward, not to progress but to perfection. It asks for freedom from sin altogether; it puts before us the picture of an ideal king who will rule God's people in righteousness, an ideal Church without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. And all this is set out as inevitable, as being near at hand, as already started and at work, with full knowledge and frankest recognition of the actual state of the world. There is never any disposition to minimize the evil in the world, or to deny the fundamental wickedness of this evil; or, on the other hand, to put up with anything less than absolute perfection. The followers of Christ have to be perfect, as their Father in Heaven is perfect.

Now this contrast between what is and what ought to be, which the Bible accepts so frankly, is always before us, is a source of much disturbance of mind, not unnaturally, to many people, and sets them to work trying to explain it. It involves them in discussions of the origin of evil, the freedom of the will, the omnipotence of God, and so on. We do not find any such discussions in the Bible. On the contrary, it is always implied that if we are perplexed God Himself is not, and that His wisdom and providence govern and control the whole order of the world, and will know how to deal with those elements in the world which seem to be thwarting His purpose. So when our Lord meets with unbelief, it is in this conviction that He rests His confidence. When the Jews ask murmuringly, 'How can a man, whose father and mother we know, come and tell us that He has come down from heaven?' He is sad, but not astonished. God has the whole matter in His control, even unbelief; no man can come to Me, He says, unless the Father that sent Me draw him.

St. Paul in 2 Thessalonians, and St. John in the Revelation, are prepared to see a tide of evil rising higher than ever before, and they do not falter at the vision ; God has His hand upon the world and guides it, and He knows when and how the power of evil can be met and finally crushed.

The Parable of the Tares, from which my text comes, puts this lesson in a most vivid form. It describes for us, if we may say so, the look of the Kingdom of God in the world. Our Lord had come preaching the Kingdom, and He knew that many people expected that when the Kingdom came it would come with a great convulsion of nature and social life ; the King would come and visibly destroy His enemies, banish all evil, and produce at a blow times of peace and righteousness. And the parable warns us against this expectation. The householder has sown good seed, of that there is no doubt : but there is a watchful enemy near who is sure to sow tares if he can. So when the servants come and tell him that the tares have already begun to appear, he is sad but he is not surprised. He knows the work of the enemy, and he knows what the result—so harassing and perplexing to faith—will necessarily be. It is that his field over which he has taken so much pains will bring forth a mixed crop, like fields over which no such trouble has been taken. There will be wheat, no doubt, but there will also be tares ; people will come and look and take note and say that after all it is very like other fields, that it is clear that you cannot keep tares out, however hard you try, and that, perhaps, as they seem part of the nature of things, they cannot be so mischievous after all.

Our Lord warns us in this parable that the Church will look like that in the world ; it will be a mixed

thing ; many of the evils which ought to have no place in it will be there ; and the world will take note of the fact. And it is this that will cause us so much pain and try us so hardly. Inside the Church, we can listen to the comforting assurance of the householder that the mischief, though serious, is not beyond remedy and is not permanent ; we can cherish that hope. But it is when we hear the comments of the world that we understand how serious the mischief is. It weakens all the witness of the followers of Christ, if it can be said with a fair show of reason : ' They are just like everybody else ; they talk big, and make large promises ; but when you come to look at them all their talk vanishes away ; they do not practise what they preach.'

We cannot, I think, avoid thinking of this lesson which Christ teaches us in the Parable of the Tares at this present time. For we are in face of a contrast that makes, or ought to make, the whole Christian world ashamed. To-day we recall the Birth of Christ and all that it meant for the world ; how with Him a new force came into the life of man, strong enough to deliver him from his sins, to break off the chains of bad habit that held him from fulfilling his own highest hopes, and to bring him again into the favour and blessing of his God. This treasure was committed to the keeping of Christ's followers, and the gift of it was to issue in peace throughout the race of men. Quarrelling and tyranny and war belonged to the old bad state of things when man was at variance with God and had no complete guidance for his religion or his moral life. For nineteen hundred years this gift has been in the world. It has won great triumphs ; individuals and nations have won victories in its strength over themselves and their temptations. It has had reverses, and the confident joy with which

the first Christians set out upon their task of spreading it through the world is hard to reclaim. And now those nations which have the strongest claim to represent the effect of the gift and message of Christ in their outward life have fallen into a state of war and bitter, savage hate. As we look back upon the events preceding the outbreak, and as the papers get into print from various sources that passed among those in whose hands the issue lay, we seem to see how inevitable it all was; but this, even if we know, as we think we do, who made it inevitable, does not modify the judgement we must pass upon the position of Europe at this time; it is profoundly un-Christian; it does represent a failure, on a tragic scale, of peoples professedly Christian to live up to their principles. I do not mean that we were not right to go to war; we should have failed hardly less completely if we had refused; it would be a grievous and ruinous failure now, if we were to shrink from sacrifice, however great and painful, which may be necessary to secure triumph for our cause. I do not ignore, again, the wonderful feeling of unity in our own nation and empire which the call to arms has evoked. Still less do I ignore the splendid and chivalrous valour with which the young men of England have come forward, sacrificing, in many cases—in all cases, postponing—their hopes and prospects in the way of useful civil work, and ready to offer their lives. I should indeed be unworthy of holding office in this House and University if I felt no pride in the spirit and temper of those who have gone out from here—and I know that they are but representatives of the whole young manhood of this country; from all districts and classes the story is the same. We do right to glory in this; to face our trials bravely, and to rejoice

in the justice of our cause. But when all this is said and done, there is no help for it; we must admit that the war is profoundly in opposition to the whole message of Christmas Day. It is like the tares in the field; it comes from the old mischief of the enemy of mankind. It will develop splendid courage and self-control and tenderness, and we know that God has His hand upon it all and will work His will through it; but war is not the Christian way in which these Christian virtues ought to be developed, nor the way in which God likes best to carry out His purpose.

Now this is, perhaps, one of the most important lessons of the Parable of the Tares, that if you want really to attain the end which God has in view, you must set about it in God's way. The servants came to the householder and said, 'Here are all these tares: shall we go and pull them up?' That seems the obvious thing to do; the tares have got there through sin and the malice of the enemy; why not pull them up at once? But that is not the householder's way. It is, if we may use modern words, the way of the pacifist—the peace-at-any-price man. He will bring about the millennium by not having any war. But that is not the right way, though it seems so complete and persuasive; you must let your tares grow with the wheat. The war ought not to be there, but you must fight it out now that you are in it. And one of the things it has got to teach us is that there is no way of finding peace 'as a real and permanent policy' except the way of Christ Himself. Surely we have already learnt out of this war and its circumstances how not to attain peace. Various methods have been put before us. There was the method of militarism—and it is hard to understand how any one ever believed in that. The militarist motto is, 'If you want peace, prepare for

war. Arm yourself to the teeth; find out by any means, high or low, what everybody else is doing; be ready always to anticipate a blow; make yourself feared, so that everybody will be afraid to go to war with you.' It is hardly possible to conceive a peace less like the peace of God than that which is attained in this way. Or, again, it has been said, 'Trust to the financiers. They will show you the advantages of trade and commerce, the dislocation in these things which comes of war, the theoretical impossibility of war, in modern days, when nations and their interests are so closely intertwined one with another.' This has broken down. In spite of all these considerations, here we are with the whole of Europe in a blaze. And what is more, commerce not only fails to prevent such wars as that we are now engaged in, it leads to serious trouble—to veiled civil warfare—in the various states concerned. Certainly the exchange of commodities under the unfettered operation of the laws of supply and demand does not produce God's peace, or anybody else's peace. And then there is education. This, at any rate, ought to keep people sane and prevent their being swept by passion. Certainly it ought; and certainly there are people whose learning leads to a balance of mind and a sense of proportion which enable them to think justly on any matter presented to them. But you cannot count on education to produce this result. Learning sometimes makes people querulous and anxious about small points; sometimes it disables them from judging decisively about anything: sometimes it enables them to defend theories, with great ingenuity and persuasiveness, which no one with an open-air knowledge of mankind would believe for a moment. So far as sheer weight of book-learning is concerned the German professoriate is the most learned body of men in

the world, but their learning has not, at this present time, made for either wisdom or peace.

All these things—education, commerce, even the power and will for self-defence—are things good in themselves in different degrees and for different ends. But the peace of God will not come through any of them or all of them combined. The way of God's peace is the way which the Son of God laid down when He became incarnate: He being in the form of God thought it not a thing to be grasped at to be equal with God, but emptied Himself and was found in fashion as a man. He sought not His own, but made Himself of no account. That is the way in which peace on earth will come, and the hope is that out of this war we may learn something of this and cease to look for peace in the wrong way. The war is too big a thing and involves too many nations for anything to remain as it was before. We have trusted too much, in the past, I am sure, to the wrong things, and the result is that till the war shook us all together we had class arrayed against class, and all sorts of causes of bitterness active amongst us. Whatever we do in the field and on the sea, we shall have suffered real defeat in this war if we go back into the old conditions and resuscitate the old party watchwords and get back into the old narrow grooves of useless and interminable conflict. If, by God's grace and help, the Allies win in the field, we must look forward to a great clearing away of old prejudices and cant phrases and delusions, to a more frank appeal to the principles of the religion which we profess, and to a more trustful attempt to attain God's end in His own way. There is no doubt as to what that way is; the story of Christmas Day sets it before us beyond the possibility of mistake. The world as we know it, and the Church as we know it, is a mixed thing

in which the work of the enemy of mankind has found entrance, and the only power that can destroy this work is the Son of God, who for us men and for our salvation came down, as on this day, from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

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